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ABSTRACT

This paper reports part of the results from a three-stage panel study of the Fall 1976 presidential campaigns; 1,927 interviews were conducted in all, 594 occurring in the week prior to the election. Results indicated that voters did not change their voting intentions significantly during the fall campaigns; that they did change the certainty with which they held their voting decisions; that voters were greatly disappointed in the debates because they expected to acquire some guidance for their voting behavior, to learn about important issues, and to acquire insights into the candidates; and that certainty about a voting decision did not dampen curiosity. Even the most certain of decisions apparently needed reinforcement, at least early in the campaign. (AA)

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The Uses of the 1976 Presidential Debates In Electoral Decision Making

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This paper was presented at the Convention of the Eastern Communication Association in New York City on March 25, 1977. Keith R. Sanders is an Associate Professor of Speech at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. William D. Kimsey is a doctoral research assistant and Alan M. Hantz is a doctoral teaching assistant at the same institution. The authors wish to express their appreciation to Southern Illinois University and Southeast Missouri State University for their support of this project. They also wish to thank L. Erwin Atwood of the School of Journalism, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and Charles Wiles, Director of Public Services at Southeast Missouri State University for their contributions to this study.

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The Uses of the 1976 Presidential Debates In

Electoral Decision Making

The purpose behind much contemporary empirical research in Speech-Communication is to find an answer to the question, "what do speeches do to people." As Cronkhite (1974) has argued, ". . . researchers have almost invariably maintained a posture crouched behind the speaker, peering over his shoulder to observe the effects of his message." This posture dramatically restricts one's breadth of vision. From this purview, one is likely to see communication as a linear series of events, rather than as process, to ignore channel variables. and to regard receiver compliance - affective, cognitive, and behavioral - as the measure of effectiveness. The "effects" researcher is, in other words, interested largely in source motives, purposes, and source related outcomes.

Recently, however, scholarship in speech-communication and mass communication has begun to exhibit an interest in a relatively new and potentially less restrictive question. Some researchers have begun to wonder if what people do with communication is not at least as important as what communication does to people. This query was first raised in a political context by Blumler and McQuail (1969) in their now classic study of the 1964 British General election, and its pursuit was stimulated by collection of papers under the editorship of Blumler and Katz (1974).

This recently remergent "uses and gratifications" perspective is concerned with

> . . . (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences perhaps mostly unintended ones (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974).

Clearly, this approach stands in contrast to most contemporary speech-communication and mass communication research. The uses and gratifications researcher sees the audience as active, goal directed, and in command of his or her destiny. As Schramm, Lyle, and Parker (1961) have asserted regarding the "effects" of television on children,

> In a sense the term 'effect' is misleading because it suggests that television 'does something' to children . . . Nothing can be further from the fact. It is the children who are most active in this relationship. It is they who use television rather than television that uses them.

There have been several recent applications of the uses and gratifications approach to the study of communication in political contexts. For example, Edelstein (1974) found in a unique study in which samples were drawn from Yugoslavia and the United States, that media use was related to individuals' differential capacities and needs for decision making. Peled and Katz (1974) found that Israeli citizens, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, used different media for different purposes. Radio was regarded as the best means to get news, and television was thought to be the best means to release tension. In an extensive longitudinal study of voter behavior in Ohio during the 1972 and 1974 elections, Mendelsohn and O'Keefe (1976) demonstrated that voters who expected (needed) to be

influenced during the campaign were more likely to report influences than those who did not anticipate being influenced. Thus, the uses and gratifications approach has produced data sufficiently encouraging to support the conclusion that it could profitably serve as a model upon which to build a study of the 1976 presidential debates. In fact, the presidential debates presented a unique opportunity for a uses and gratifications study. Especially one which focused on the relationship between the decisional change in voters and their changing informational needs.

Conventional wisdom, and some empirical data, indicate that about one-third of the electorate arrives at a presidential voting intention prior to the national conventions, another one-third decides during the conventions, and the remaining one-third after the conventions. There is, therefore, a decisional dynamic working, at least in the sense that not everyone decided at the same time. Moreover, in one of the few studies that addresses the communication exposure levels of decided and undecided voters, Hantz and Kimsey (1976) found that these groups differ in the amount and kind of information they hold at various periods over the course of the campaign. However, we simply do not know, even in broad dimensions, what the relationship is between the decisional process and the informational needs of the voter.

Effects oriented theorists and researchers argue with conviction that persuasion is a process characterized by certain stages. For instance, Monroe (1949) contended that persuasion consists of five attention stages:

(1) attention, (2) need, (3) satisfaction, (4) visualization, and (5) action. And McGuire (1974) argued that the steps are: presentation, attention, comprehension, yielding, retention, and overt behavior. These models, and all other like sequences, proceed from the point of view of the source. We have not been able to find a single receiver oriented model of the persuasion process, in spite of the possibility that audience needs may be far more important than source needs in determining the outcome of the process.

It makes sense that if, for example, one is in the "comprehension" stage he might want information from both sides, and might find the debates useful. But if he is in the "yielding" stage or the "retention" stage he may need reinforcement and might want to avoid the debates, preferring more partisan forms of communication. Unresolved issues such as these lead us to ask four questions.

Over the course of the fall, 1976 Presidential campaigns,
(1) Did voters change their voting intentions?
(2) Did they change the confidence which they placed in their voting decision?
(3) Did they change their perceptions of how they were using the debates for decisional purposes?
(4) What if any relationship exists between a high level of certainty about a voting intention and informational needs?

Methods and Procedures

The data for this study were obtained from a three stage panel study conducted in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, during the fall of 1976. Cape Girardeau is a small industrial community of 35,000 located along the west

bank of the Mississippi River about one hundred miles south of St. Louis. The tenth Congressional District, containing Cape Girardeau, has a history of conservatism. In 1968 George Wallace captured nineteen percent of the vote in this district, more than any single district in his home state of Alabama. In 1972, the district voted solidly for Richard Nixon (66%), but in the same year re-elected their democratic congressman, Thomas Burlisen, by a substantial margin. In 1976, 48.5 percent of the voters in Cape Girardeau supported Jimmy Carter, while 51.5 percent supported Gerald Ford.

The primary sources of information for residents of Cape Girardeau consist of one television station and two newspapers based in the city, as well as five radio stations operating in the immediate vicinity. Included in the 35,000 population of Cape Girardeau are some 8,000 students at Southeast Missouri State University.

Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from the July 1976 edition of the Cape Girardeau City Directory and the fall, 1976 registration list of Southeast Missouri State University. The population for this study was defined as all non-students listed in the city directory together with all students appearing on the registration list and living in Cape Girardeau. This amounted to 20,934 persons, of whom 15,000 were non-students and 5,934 were students. The sample was selected by entering the combined lists at a random point and choosing every tenth name. This procedure produced a sample of 2,093 potential respondents.

Design

This study employed a five-group, three stage panel design, as depicted in Figure 1.

A control group of 400 persons was randomly selected from the sample of 2,093. This group was called only once, at the final stage of the panel, and the results obtained serve as a test of interview sensitivity. The remaining 1693 persons were called at random during the first panel, lasting from September nine to September eighteen, 1976.

Respondents completing interviews in the first panel numbered 917. These respondents were randomly assigned to one of four groups. Group one was called during the period of September 24 to September 27, immediately after the second debate (October 6). This panel yielded one hundred forty-two respondents. Group three was contacted during the period of October 12 to October 17, right after the Vice-Presidential debate (October 11). There were one hundred and forty-two respondents at this stage. After the fourth debate (the third Presidential debate) group four was contacted, yielding one hundred fifty-seven respondents. Group five, the control group, was also contacted at this time, and one hundred-eleven respondents were contacted. This period after the fourth debate and just before the election (October 26 to November 1) was also the occasion of a third interview for groups one, two and three, yielding one hundred-fifteen, one hundred-ten, and one hundred-one interviews, respectively.

Over the course of the entire study, nearly two thousand (1,927)

Figure 1

Panel Design for the 1976 Debates and Election Study

Group	Interview 9/9-9/18	Debate 9/23	Interview 9/24-9/27	Debate 10/6	Interview 10/7-10/10	Debate 10/11	Interview 10/12-10/17	Debate 10/24	Interview 10/26-11/1
1	(n = 229)	x	(n = 132)	x		x		x	(n = 115)
2	(n = 229)	x		x	(n = 142)	x		x	(n = 110)
3	(n = 229)	x		x		x	(n = 142)	x	(n = 101)
4	(n = 229)	x		x		x		x	(n = 157)
5		x		x		x		x	(n = 111)

interviews were conducted, with nearly six hundred (594) occurring in the week prior to the election. Individuals in groups one, two and three were interviewed a total of three times; persons in group four were interviewed twice; group five was contacted only once, at the final stage.

Interview Procedures

Interviews upon which this study is based were conducted by students in the undergraduate research methods classes at Southern Illinois University and at Southeast Missouri State University. The interviews averaged 13 minutes each.

Respondents were asked a wide range of questions, including measures of attitudes toward the candidates, the issues they thought important, whether they intended to watch the debates, or, after the debates, whether they had watched and if so for how long. In addition they were asked about their voting intentions, the certainty with which they held their voting intentions, and a series of gratifications questions. The gratifications questions were preceded by the following explanation:

> As you know, the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates have announced that they will hold some debates between now and the election. Let me read you some statements people have made when asked why they intend to watch the debates.

Respondents were then asked to indicate whether each of ten statements applied to them "a lot," "a little," or "not at all." The four sets of responses which are analyzed in this paper were generated by the following statements:

I intend to watch (I watched) the debates:
(1) to help me decide what the candidates are really like
(2) to help keep up with the main issues of the day
(3) to remind me of my candidate's strong points
(4) to help me decide who is going to win the election

These, and other gratifications questions were taken from those used initially by Blumler and McQuail (1969) and refined by Becker and McLeed (1972) in their study of voters in Madison, Wisconsin.

Data from these four questions and from the standard voting behavior question, "If the election were held today, for which of the two Presidential candidates would you vote," and a question on the certainty with which the voting intentions were held, "How certain are you of your decision to vote for _____," constitute the data base for this preliminary report of our findings.

Unfortunately, this paper presents data from the one hundred-fifteen persons in group one only. These persons were interviewed prior to the first debate, and after the fourth debate, just prior to the election. The interview schedule has a large number of open-ended questions requiring an extensive coding process. In fact, it takes roughly four hours for a trained coder to interpret the three interviews obtained from each subject in order to prepare them for the computer. We are about a month away from being able to discuss the entire data set. Group one is, however, a random sub-set of the total data base.

Results and Discussion

Over the course of the fall, 1976 Presidential election, did voters change their voting intentions? Insofar as our respondents are concerned,

the answer is "no."

Table 1

Vote Intention by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Jimmy Carter	26	.23	26	.23	31	.27
Gerald Ford	39	.34	47	.41	49	.43
Undecided	24	.21	20	.17	13	.11
RA/NA	26	.23	22	.19	22	.19
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: χ^2 does not include NA, and total

$\chi^2 = 5.017$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Although Carter went from twenty-three percent of the vote at time 1 to twenty-seven percent of the vote at time 3, and while Ford went from thirty-four percent at time 1 to forty-three percent at time 3, these fluctuations were not substantial enough to produce an overall change that was statistically significant. Voters changed their voting intentions, but not to a degree which exceeds chance.

This is not an unusual finding. Data such as these are frequently used to support the argument that campaigns--even campaigns which feature debates--do not make much difference in terms of who wins or loses. And, if voting intentions are the sole criteria, this is an accurate judgment.

However, other criteria indicate that campaigns are accompanied by considerable change. Table 2 provides clear indications of change.

Table 2

Vote Certainty by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very Certain	20	.17	34	.30	40	.35
Certain	19	.25	31	.27	22	.19
Not Very Certain	21	.18	24	.21	14	.12
DK	7	.06	2	.02	10	.09
RA/NA*	38	.33	24	.21	29	.25
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: χ^2 does not include RA/NA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 14.969$ d.f. = 6 $p < .05$

*This category includes those voters who (RA) refused to answer and those voters who had no voting preference and thus for whom the question was (NA) not applicable.

Table 2 indicates that ever since the course of the fall campaign, voters came to feel more certain about their voting intentions. At time 1, seventeen percent of our sample told us that they were very certain about the voting decision they had made. By time three, this percent doubled. Campaigns

apparently provide information which allows us to feel better about our voting choices.

Turning now to the debates, and to the audience which they attracted, Table 3 indicates that the number of persons watching diminished dramatically between September and the week before the election.

Table 3

Debate Watch by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Watch	81	.70	59	.51	43	.37
Don't Watch	5	.04	36	.31	55	.48
Don't Know	5	.04	1	.01	0	0
Refused/NA	24	.21	19	.17	17	.15
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: χ^2 does not include DK, RA/NA, Totals.

$\chi^2 = 52.142$ d.f. = 2 $p < .05$

Before the first debate in September, when asked how many persons expected to watch the debates, seventy percent said that they were going to watch. When we talked to the same group after the first debate, and asked if they had watched, fifty-one percent said yes, and after the fourth debate,

thirty-seven percent responded yes to the same question. At time one, only four percent of our sample said they didn't intend to watch, but by the week before the election nearly half--forty-eight percent--said that they didn't watch the last debate. Clearly, many more persons expected to watch the first debate than who did watch, and many more persons watched the second debate than watched the third debate. Whatever functions the debates were performing for voters apparently diminished dramatically up the course of the fall campaign.

Did voters perceive themselves as acquiring information from the debates which would help them make a voting decision? We attempted to answer this question by analyzing, over time, the answers to four of the ten gratifications questions posed to our respondents. Table 4 summarizes their answers to the question of whether the following statement applied to them "a lot," "a little," or "not at all." "I expect to learn some things from the debates which will help me make up my mind about how to vote in the election." At time two and time three, the question was phrased, "I learned some things from the debate which helped me make up my mind about how to vote in the election."

Table 4

Helped Me How to Decide to Vote by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	39	.34	8	.07	2	.02

Table 4 (Con't.)

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A little	18	.16	20	.17	12	.10
Not at all	25	.22	34	.30	30	.61
DK/RA	32	.28	17	.15	16	.14
Didn't watch	5	.04	36	.31	55	.48
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: $\times^2$ does not include DK/NA and Totals.

$\times^2 = 37.589$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

At time one thirty-four percent of our sample expected to learn something that would help them make up their minds about how to vote, whereas only two percent believed that the fourth debate had taught them anything that helped in this regard.

Issues are said, by some, to be important in the decision making process of voters. Did our respondents feel that the debates helped them "Keep up with the main issues of the day?" Table 5 depicts the same pattern noted earlier.

Table 5

What Are the Main Issues by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	58	.50	13	.11	6	.05
A little	22	.19	29	.25	17	.15
Not at all	8	.07	26	.23	22	.19
DK/RA	22	.19	11	.09	15	.13
Didn't watch	5	.04	36	.31	55	.48
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: χ^2 does not include DK/NA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 56.059$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Half of respondents cipated that the debates would help them stay abreast of the content of the campaign; after the first debate only eleven percent thought they had been able to use the debates for this purpose. After the fourth debate, only five percent thought they had been able to use the debates "a lot" for this purpose.

Did voters learn things from the debates which helped them decide what the candidates were "really like?" Again, their expectations were not met as Table 6 indicates.

Table 6

What the Candidates are Really Like by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	47	.41	10	.09	11	.10
A little	29	.25	34	.30	25	.22
Not at all	8	.07	25	.22	20	.17
DK/RA	26	.23	10	.09	4	.03
Didn't watch	5	.04	36	.31	55	.48
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: χ^2 did not include DK/NA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 39.887$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Prior to the first debate, forty-one percent expected to gain insights into the candidates by watching the debates. After the first and last debate, only about ten percent felt they had acquired such insights.

Did the voters perceive the debates as having reinforcement value? The limited effects theorists would argue that campaigns, for the most part, serve a reinforcement function. They would argue that campaigns and presidential debates are more recreative than creative--that they would be used to reinforce decisions already made rather than to make decisions.

We therefore asked our respondents whether watching the debates

reminded them of their candidates' strong points. Data reported in Table 1 would suggest that the answer to this question would be in the affirmative. More than half the electorate, fifty-seven percent, had made up its mind before the first debate, and by the end of the fall campaign more than seventy percent had made a voting decision. Conventional theory would strangely suggest that these persons would be looking for information to support their decision.

Table 7

Helped Remind Me of Candidates' Strong Points by Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	39	.34	8	.07	8	.07
A little	28	.24	24	.21	21	.18
Not at all	11	.10	22	.19	13	.11
DK/RA	32	.28	25	.22	18	.16
Didn't watch	5	.04	36	.31	55	.48
Totals	115	100	115	100	115	100

Note: χ^2 does not include DK/RA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 25.663$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Table 7 indicates that sixty-four percent expected "a lot" or "a little" help in this respect, but, they were greatly disappointed. By wave three,

only twenty-five percent believed that the debates helped remind them of their candidates' strong points.

Turning now to a somewhat different question: What, if any, relationship exists between the levels of certainty voters feel about their voting intentions and their informational needs over time? In order to answer, we employed a three-way cross tabulation. Table 8 presents the results of such a tabulation using only those voters who said they were very certain about their voting decision and time 1, time 2, and time 3.

Table 8

Very Certain of Vote for How to Vote Over Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	12	.60	2	.06	1	.03
A little	6	.30	7	.21	7	.18
None	0	.00	14	.41	16	.40
DK/RA	2	.10	11	.32	16	.40
Totals	20		34		40	

Note: χ^2 does not include DK/RA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 32.235$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

You may recall that thirty voters or seventeen percent of our sample was "very certain" about for whom they were going to vote when we talked

to them just before the first debate, thirty percent were "very certain" after the first debate and thirty-five percent were "very certain" after the fourth debate. We were curious about what happened to these persons over the course of the Fall campaign in terms of how they used the debates to "learn things" which helped them make up their minds about how to vote. If these voters were "very certain" about how to vote from the beginning we would expect them to find the debates of little value in helping them to make up their minds. Table 8 suggests that this was the case.

Even though they said they were "very certain" about their voting decision, sixty percent of our sample said they expected to learn a lot which would help them make up their minds about how to vote, but by time 2 this percentage had dropped to only six percent, and by time 3 only one person, or three percent of the sample, said they had used the debates in this manner.

Did voters who were very certain of their voting intentions use the debates to help them "keep up with the main issues of the day?" One would think, that if issues have some utility in terms of arriving at a voting decision, respondents might reduce their use of them as they became more certain of how they intended to vote. Table 9 provides one answer to this question.

Table 9

Very Certain of Vote for Main Issues Over Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	12	.60	3	.09	3	.08
A little	6	.30	10	.29	10	.25
None	0	.00	10	.29	11	.28
DK/RA	2	.10	11	.32	16	.40
Totals	20		34		40	

Note: χ^2 does not include DK/RA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 22.005$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Sixty percent of those who were very certain of their voting decision at time 1 said they expected to learn a lot from the debates about the issues. By time 3, this figure had dropped to eight percent. The changes in Table 10 are statistically significant, as they are in all of the tables we present in this paper, with the exception of Table 1.

How did those voters who were very certain of their voting decision use the debates to find "out what the candidates are really like?" Table 10 depicts a familiar pattern.

Table 10

Very Certain of Vote for Candidate Likes Over Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	9	.45	4	.12	7	.18
A little	6	.30	11	.32	14	.35
None	3	.15	10	.29	3	.08
DK/NA	2	.10	9	.26	16	.40
Totals	20		34		40	

Note: χ^2 does not include DK/NA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 9.906$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Fewer than half, forty-five percent, expected to use the debates in this manner at time 1, while twelve percent said they had done so at time 2, and thirty-five at time 3. The expectations were not as high in this case, thus, the disappointments were not as great.

Did persons who were very certain about their voting decision need to use the debates to help remind themselves of their candidates' strong points?

Table 11

Very Certain of Vote for Candidates' Strong Points Over Time

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	14	.70	4	.12	5	.13
A little	2	.10	9	.26	12	.30
None	2	.10	7	.21	6	.15
DK/RA	2	.10	14	.41	17	.43
Totals	20		34		40	

Note: χ^2 does not include DK/RA and Totals.

$\chi^2 = 18.052$ d.f. = 4 $p < .05$

Seventy percent of this group, while very certain of their voting decision, hoped to use the debates for this purpose; however, only twelve percent felt they had been reinforced after the first debate, and only thirteen percent felt they had been able to use the debates for this purpose after the fourth debate.

Conclusions

Returning to the questions which prompted this inquiry, we can, within the limitations of this study, conclude that:

1. Voters did not change their voting intentions significantly, in spite of the debates and in spite of all of the other communication exposure they experienced during the Fall campaigns.

2. Voters changed the certainty with which they held their voting decisions. In this regard, a decisional dynamic was operative.

3. Voters were greatly disappointed in the debates. They expected to make much decisional use of them. They expected to acquire some guidance for their voting behavior, learn about important issues, and acquire insights into the candidates. On all counts, they were disappointed, and substantial portions simply quite watching.

4. Certainty about a voting decision does not dampen curiosity. Respondents who were "very certain" of their voting intentions nevertheless expected much decisional help from the debates, and were disappointed when they did not acquire it. Even the most certain of decisions apparently needs reinforcement, at least early in the campaign. Reaching a voting decision does not mean that colsure has been achieved, particularly, perhaps in an environment wherein the major communications event makes selective exposure difficult.

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